Book Review: Regionalism with Adjectives in Latin America

José Briceño-Ruiz and Isidro Morales (Eds.). 2017. *Post-Hegemonic Regionalism in the Americas. Toward a Pacific–Atlantic Divide?* Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 204pp., U.S.\$149.95, Hardback.

Reviewed by Andrés Malamud

Magical realism is a narrative strategy characterized by the inclusion of fantastic elements in realistic fiction. A typical product of Latin America, the family of magical realism celebrates the arrival of its youngest member—magical regionalism. This book constitutes a welcome contribution to the analysis of regionalism in the Americas, which—with few exceptions—distinguishes itself from the European version in that narratives substitute for institutions, and agendas replace policies.

Let us be clear; to compare is not to revere. European integration has long been a source of inspiration for regionalist movements elsewhere, but for scholars it constitutes a reference rather than a model. Distinguishing contemporary Latin American regionalism from its European counterpart is as valid as distinguishing it from previous Latin American experiences, which is precisely what this book purports to do.

And Latin American it is, because only one chapter in nine—the one written by the editor Isidro Morales—extends its scope to a regional organization that includes the United States and Canada.

In the introduction, the editors do a great job at presenting the state of the art. Perhaps their most important contribution is the definition of “post-hegemonic” as a scenario in which, “there is no single narrative framing and driving LAC cooperation and integration.” The wording is important; for the authors, it is not interests or power but narratives that drive regional integration—or do not. This seemingly constructivist framework pervades the entire book. It would be fine if narratives allowed us to understand the social construction of reality. A problem looms when narratives are used to explain themselves instead of the extradiscursive world.

The substitution of words for data becomes clear in José Briceño-Ruiz and Morales’ reference to “the new Mercosur,” which they place together with the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) as representative of post-hegemonic regionalism. Yet, there is no such thing as a “new Mercosur,” since there have been no treaties that change the structure of “old Mercosur” since at least 1998. In

fact, the installation of a review tribunal in 2004 confirmed the commercial nature of the organization. In 2007, the establishment of a parliament devoid of decision-making capacities did not alter the intergovernmental nature of Mercosur, either. The creation of a meager structural fund in 2005 did little to hide the nonexistence of a regional budget. Finally, Venezuela's troubled accession in 2012 was cancelled out by its suspension in 2017. Hegemony or a lack thereof has induced no transformation of the bloc. To give credit to the authors, they sometimes use quotation marks to refer to "the new Mercosur," as if suggesting that there is something not kosher in the term.

The chapter by Pía Riggirozzi and Diana Tussie constitutes an exhortation rather than an analysis. They "call for regions and regionalism beyond institutionalist and trade-based approaches to be taken more seriously as norm brokers and value claiming spaces" in academic research. They embrace the concept of "new regionalism" as a scholarly paradigm rather than an observable phenomenon, a paradigm that reflects "the complex linkages among regionalism, globalization, and the neoliberal transformation" (p. 21). It is puzzling that they quote Laura Gómez-Mera to make their case, since she bluntly "challenges the usefulness of the analytical and theoretical separation between New Regionalism and mainstream international relations approaches" (Gómez-Mera, 2008, p. 279).

Morales' chapter on U.S. free-trade diplomacy is an excellent reminder of the distinction between regionalization and regionalism. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as he shows, crystallizes the former—a market-led process that fosters regional interdependence—rather than the latter—a state-led project that establishes common institutions. As valuable as this analysis is, it has lost traction as Trump's ascension to power terminated the policy to export a free-trade model.

Cintia Quiliconi claims that there have been several types of regionalism in Latin America and shows that none has quite worked. Although the chapter contains some unsupported claims, such as assuming a single leadership role for Brazil in Mercosur or claiming that the Pacific Alliance creates greater bargaining power vis-à-vis China, it reasserts a correct focus on trade rather than babbling about narratives or agendas. The challenge remains to define and measure extractivism, which she claims to be "the main cause of trade integration stagnation in Latin America" (p. 58). Notably, the author does not make a distinction between renewable and nonrenewable raw materials, further debilitating her valuable insight, since agricultural goods are produced, not extracted.

The chapter by Briceño-Ruiz adopts a more-nuanced approach, since his usage of the term "post-hegemonic" is not chronological but ideological. He shows that open regionalism and posthegemonic/postliberal regionalism coexist instead of substituting each other. He refers to a current threefold division, the "new Mercosur" (again, with quotation marks that denote something we do not grasp fully), ALBA, and the Pacific Alliance. We can loosely associate these entities to administered trade, barter, and free trade, respectively. His conclusion is that Latin American regionalism shows an astonishing dynamism (p. 94), an optimistic assessment that—with the same data and less complacency—could be read as instability, inconsistency, or wobbliness.

José Antonio Sanahuja's chapter questions the relevance of the Pacific–Atlantic divide by highlighting the characteristics shared by all Latin American regionalisms, “a clear preference for intergovernmentalism and low levels of institutionalization, as well as for preserving sovereignty and autonomy in the national realm” (p. 118). These features are independent of “ideological cleavages, national leaderships, and political cycles.” If subregional particularities appeared important during the 2005–2015 period, it was due to the supercycle of commodities that contributed to disguise the regional commonalities.

The contribution by Mario Carranza wonders whether Mercosur is resilient or declining, and he describes three potential scenarios—strong resilience, weak resilience, and decline and collapse, the second being the present situation and the first, his normative choice. This framework suffers from analytical bias and logic fallacy. The analytical bias stems from the author's revealed preference for resilience, hence two of the three scenarios that carry this label. The logical fallacy consists of conflating his unwanted scenario—decline—with much-maligned collapse, which is neither the same as decline nor its necessary consequence. Indeed, resilience and decline do not necessarily exclude each other, since the former is a category of endurance and the latter of performance. Thus, it is mistaken to attribute to Malamud and Gardini (2012) the claim that Mercosur “has already collapsed” (p. 137), since these authors diagnose peaking, not collapse. As it happens, “inconsequential endurance” (Malamud, 2010, p. 643)—weak resilience in Carranza's terms—characterizes Latin American regionalism overall.

Looking at the Pacific Alliance, Lorena Oyarzún Serrano argues that it embodies the return of open regionalism to Latin America, in both opposition to anti-imperialist organizations such as ALBA and competition with “the ideas of Mercosur” (p. 154), whatever they are. Her analysis shows that the bloc's activities go beyond the region, since its member countries—yet please note, not the organization as such—get involved in several negotiations that include world giants such as the United States and China.

Olivier Dabène and Kevin Parthenay analyze a subregion—Central America—neglected by students who select their cases based on the presence of regional powers. They point out that, since most countries in the subregion have two coasts, “the Atlantic versus Pacific divide issue does not arise in the same terms in Central America as in South America.” Indeed, regionalism has historically been a pragmatic rather than ideological strategy in the region, and it is likely to remain so. Except for Panama and Costa Rica, they add, regionalist strategies are “more a matter of procrastination than preferences.” The combination of pragmatism, procrastination, and the absence of a regional power has turned Central America into the most likely subregion to be dragged by an “external federator,” a role the United States performed in the early 1960s, and the European Union has unsuccessfully attempted to perform afterwards.

Briceño-Ruiz, Tullo Vigevani, and Karina Pasquariello Mariano compare the regionalist strategies of Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela to conclude that they had one commonality and one difference. The commonality is the “spillover into the international sphere” (p. 188) of their domestic-policy

preferences, which voiced a concern for social policies and economic redistribution. The difference lies in Venezuela acting like a “revolutionary state” (or revisionist) in its sponsorship of ALBA, whereas Argentina and Brazil opted for a less confrontational approach to their instrumentalization of Mercosur and UNASUR. The most remarkable statement comes at the end, when the authors admit that the posthegemonic era “may have lasted only a decade” (p. 190). If they are right, as they probably are, this book is not a map but an epitaph. Yet, as van Klaveren emphasizes in an up-to-date state of the art, “the institutional disorder of Latin American regionalism should not be confused with the absence of regional regimes” (van Klaveren, 2017, p. 22). If underperformance is guaranteed, so is survival.

The last chapter, by the editors, concludes that, “post-hegemonic regionalism was largely South American” (p. 194), the only subregion in the Americas where the Pacific–Atlantic divide makes any sense, but the most relevant factor in the singling out of South America from the rest is the growing influence of China, as Oyarzún Serrano points out and the editors recall. The decade of post-hegemonic regionalism overlapped fully with the commodity supercycle, which linked an increasingly demanding China with resource-rich South America and sub-Saharan Africa. The authors wrap up with an understatement, by claiming that no regionalist model—whether liberal like NAFTA or post-hegemonic like ALBA—“has proved to be completely successful” (p. 199).

After reading this book, those who still believe in the continuity of posthegemonic regionalism face a further challenge. A recent publication by Petersen and Schulz (2018) shows that the retraction of the United States and the presence of left-leaning governments do not justify the “posthegemonic” label, since the progressive agenda is not novel, and the United States has not impeded similar initiatives in the past. Instead, the authors concur with the conclusions of this book in that, “agenda shifts are best explained by an evolving consensus about the role of the state. The ‘new agenda’ is in line with historical attempts by governments to use regionalism to bolster their own domestic reforms” (Petersen & Schulz, 2018, p. 102). In short, regionalism is domestic politics by other means.

This indispensable book faces the threat of early ageing because of two powerful foes, China and Mr. Trump. China defies the idea of a Pacific–Atlantic divide, as its growing influence tears Latin America apart, between those in the North that cannot escape the gravity of the U.S. market, and those in the South that, due to the geography of natural resources, are becoming spokes of an emerging Asian hub. In turn, the challenge Mr. Trump poses to free trade and his turn toward protectionism militate not just against open regionalism but also against posthegemonic regionalism. The U.S. repeal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the termination of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations suggest that the end of hegemony might not become a boost but a burst for regionalism as a top foreign strategy. So much have we been discussing adjectives that we have lost sight of the noun—and regionalism may have been surreptitiously receding rather than transforming.

About the Author

Andrés Malamud is a PhD in political science (European University Institute, 2003) and a senior research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon.

References

- Gómez-Mera, L. (2008). How 'new' is the 'New Regionalism' in the Americas? The case of MERCOSUR. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11(3), 279–308.
- Malamud, A. (2010). Latin American regionalism and EU studies. *Journal of European Integration*, 32(6), 637–657.
- Malamud, A., & Gardini, G. L. (2012). Has regionalism peaked? The Latin American quagmire and its lessons. *The International Spectator*, 47(1), 116–133.
- Petersen, M., & Schulz, C.-A. (2018). Setting the regional agenda: A critique of posthegemonic regionalism. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 60(1), 102–127.
- Van Klaveren, A. (2017, December). *Regionalism in Latin America. Navigating in the fog* (Working Paper, No. 25/2017). Bern, Switzerland: World Trade Institute.